

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures have presented a unique set of challenges for educators, families, parents, and entire communities. As a result of the pandemic, districts are making adjustments to meet historic budget shortfalls while maintaining programs and designing systems for potential hybrid and distance learning scenarios. As part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Congress set aside approximately \$13.2 billion for the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER Fund).¹ Of that, California K-12 schools will receive about \$1.65 billion to help relieve budget stress; the allocation of these funds is an important discussion point for educators. As educators currently in the classroom, we have the unique perspective and first-hand experience of teaching during a pandemic that can inform budgetary considerations. To help inform local decision-making, Teach Plus conducted a state-wide survey of K-12 educators focusing on recommendations for spending CARES Act funds.

We are a group of California Teach Plus Policy Fellows who educate students in schools across the state in varying grades and subject areas. We are committed to elevating the teacher voice and highlighting the expertise of educators to increase equitable opportunities for students. Based on our decades of classroom experience and current research, in this memo we present findings and recommendations to move education in our state forward in these unprecedented times.

Findings

1. The need for one-to-one technology and internet accessibility remains a primary concern as K-12 teachers consider how to use additional federal funds.
2. The mental and physical well-being of students, staff, and families is a priority for educators for additional federal funding.
3. Educators believe that schools need to use additional CARES funds to address a broad range of needs to improve learning outcomes during and after the pandemic, including staffing, curriculum development, professional development, and interventions.

Recommendations

1. In addition to providing one-to-one technology and internet accessibility, districts should utilize CARES Act funds to provide effective training to students, staff, and communities to maximize the use of one-to-one technology and internet accessibility.
2. District and school leaders should put forward clear and concise plans that prioritize mental and physical well-being of students and staff and maximize the impact of CARES Act funds through creative community-based solutions.
3. As district leaders make plans for investing CARES Act funding, they should make sure teachers have a voice in shaping systemic solutions and ensure they receive effective professional development, space, and flexibility to meet students' academic needs.

METHODOLOGY

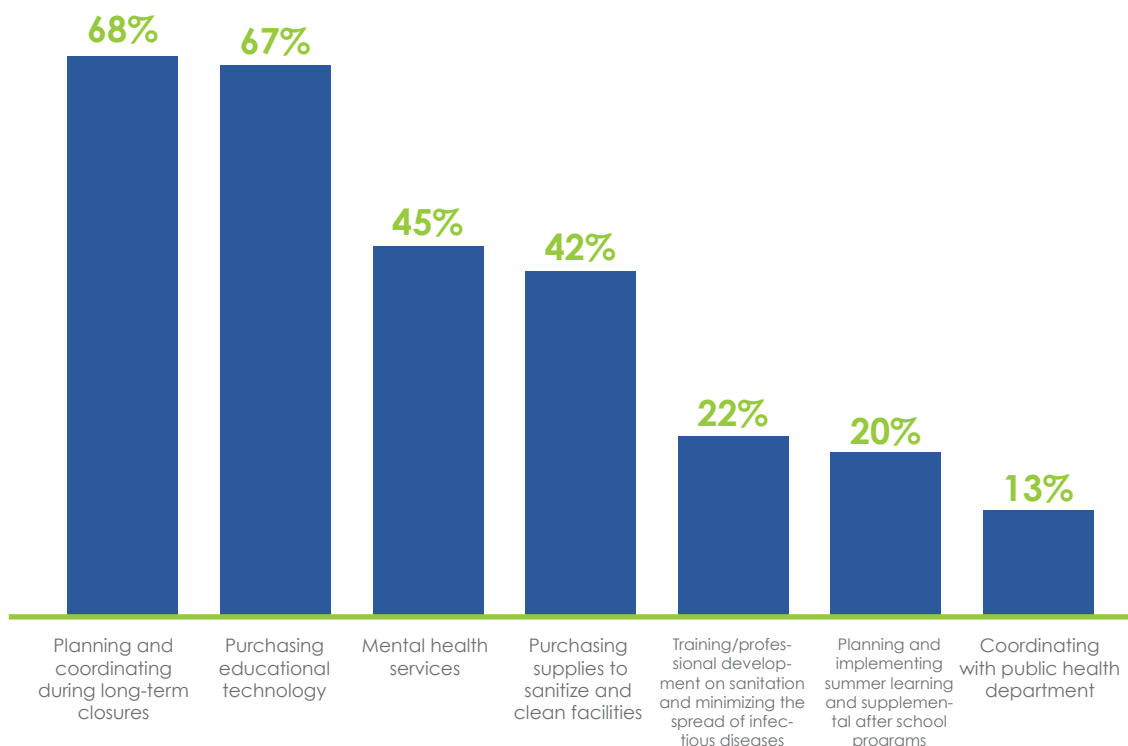
In order to better understand how teachers would prioritize the \$1.65 billion California would receive from the ESSER Fund of the CARES Act, we conducted a survey open to teachers throughout the state from May 8 to May 21, 2020. The survey asked teachers to identify areas of investment that would be most important for their schools and students within the categories identified by the federal government, including:

- + Planning and coordinating during long-term closures, including how to provide meals to eligible students, technology for online learning, and IDEA guidance;
- + Purchasing educational technology, including: hardware; software; connectivity; assistive technology; or, adaptive equipment;
- + Planning and implementing summer learning and supplemental after school programs;
- + Mental health services;
- + Coordinating with public health department;
- + Training/professional development on sanitation and minimizing the spread of infectious diseases; and
- + Purchasing supplies and providing appropriate staffing to effectively sanitize and clean facilities.

The survey collected recommendations within the prioritized areas about how teachers would allocate federal funds to be spent at their school sites and within their districts. The 201 teachers who responded to the survey teach in districts from Chula Vista to Yuba City, with representation from most regions of the state, including the South Coast, Inland Empire, Desert, Central Coast, Bay Area, San Joaquin Valley, and Sacramento Valley. Over 75 percent of respondents work at Title I schools. Also, 29 percent worked in high schools, 13 percent in middle schools, 9 percent in K-8 schools, and 46 percent in elementary schools. The teachers' feedback was aggregated and analyzed for common trends and illustrative responses.

TEACHERS PRIORITIES FOR CARES ACT FUNDING: OVERVIEW

As an overarching question, we asked teachers which of the categories of investment would be most important for their school and students. This chart reflects the cumulative preferences. Respondents were able to select up to three priorities.²



The most common category selected by the respondents was planning and coordinating during long-term closures, including how to provide meals to eligible students, technology for online learning, and IDEA guidance (68 percent); and the second most common category was purchasing educational technology, including hardware, software, connectivity, assistive technology, or adaptive equipment (67 percent).

FINDINGS

1. The need for one-to-one technology and internet accessibility remains a primary concern as K-12 teachers consider how to use additional federal funds.

The unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to creative distribution of technology and internet accessibility within and between districts and significant improvements in access for all students. However, even with these successes, teachers continue to be concerned about the availability of technology and internet accessibility for future use, especially for our disadvantaged students. Not only did 67 percent of respondents identify purchasing technology as a priority, surveyed teachers pointed to technology as a priority in their responses in other categories as well. As one fifth grade teacher stated, *“Recent distance learning has once more shown the difference between haves (and) have nots. Access to technology has only widened the (achievement) gap.”* Teachers also emphasized the need for supportive technology equipment to include document cameras, microphones, and scanners in order to implement distance learning successfully.

“Students need access to the internet. Access to education should not be reliant on the parent’s ability to pay for (the) internet.”

-Educator from Title I school

"Kids should not have to leave their homes during a global pandemic to seek wifi."

-High School Science Teacher

As one elementary teacher shared, *"Teachers are trying to make educational videos without a suitable video camera, appropriate editing software, and training. Give this to the teachers so they can all be on a level playing field and be the best teachers they can be."* Educators

maintain the need for one-to-one technology and internet accessibility for all students while recognizing that staff also need supportive equipment to teach effectively.³

2. The mental and physical well-being of students, staff, and families is a priority for educators for additional federal funding.

The collective traumatic experience of the COVID-19 pandemic is a pressing issue that schools and districts must address. Teachers across the state expressed the need for additional school counselors, psychologists, and social workers to support students, educators, families, parents, and the community.

This sentiment is reinforced by teachers from San Diego to Oakland, highlighting the need for statewide mental health interventions in schools. Additionally, teachers call for action to support educators and families, recognizing the trauma their students' and colleagues' families experienced and continue to experience through the pandemic. When considering California's educational system, all stakeholders need an opportunity to heal, to grow, and to learn strategies to address trauma to overcome the next set of challenges as we navigate through the pandemic and post-pandemic.

"We need professional trauma mental health counselors to help our students deal with the trauma of COVID 19 and the specific emotional, psychological, financial and legal impact that it is had on their lives."

-High School Educator

Another challenge that districts faced during the school closures was food distribution. In 2018-19, 59.4 percent of California school children were eligible for free-and-reduced meals and depend on their schools for food during the week.⁴ Even with strides made in food distribution, teachers continue to be concerned about meeting the needs of students and families in the near future. According to Maslow's hierarchy of need, food is at the foundational level, and hunger is a real barrier to learning. As one high school teacher stated, *"Funds should be spent on meals first. Students can't learn if they are hungry."* The continuation of meal distribution improves the well-being of students and families and is a priority of educators for the allocation of the CARES Act funding.

As districts grapple with what school will look like in the fall, teachers raised concerns regarding sanitation supplies and the need for cleaned learning environments. Educators believe that CARES Act funding should be allocated to ensure the appropriate sanitation supplies are purchased to clean and maintain learning environments. An elementary teacher believes, *"Schools should have supplies for disinfecting surfaces, yes, but more importantly, the people who are returning to the facilities need more than hand sanitizer, gloves, and wipes. Schools in China are setting the precedent with ozone sprays, shoe disinfectant, hats and masks."* While the need for sanitation supplies to keep learning environments clean seems straightforward, the financial strain of purchasing such large quantities for districts should be considered.⁵

3. Educators believe that schools need to use additional CARES funds to address a broad range of needs to improve learning outcomes during and after the pandemic, including staffing, curriculum development, professional development, and interventions.

In the survey, educators shared that they faced significant challenges transitioning to an online environment while supporting students and families, and developing new curriculum. The sense of overwhelm is reflected in the words of one middle school teacher,

"The teachers at my school are working so hard. They reached out to families... helped them apply for unemployment...secured funding for free books for our kids...packed bags of groceries to give away...learned how to use new technology to make distance learning more accessible for our English learners... raised money from their personal networks to give to families...pledged their stimulus checks to our undocumented students. We are trying so hard, and it feels like we are not making a dent, because these problems are systemic."

This sentiment is supported by an elementary educator stating, *"Teachers are in the trenches developing online curriculum at the same time we are teaching students virtually and helping parents and families navigate the online platforms."*

Looking ahead to the return to school, survey respondents recognize the need to create and implement innovative strategies to support students' learning, particularly as it relates to staffing and the use of time. *"There may need to be more before and after school intervention(s) to help those students that fell way behind during school closure,"* says an elementary school teacher. Another teacher supports this by stating, *"If students had clear expectations as to a summer school online learning plan they can engage with at home and can be done at their own pace then they can be better prepared to hit the ground running when the school year begins."*

While many of the recommendations pointed to additional instructional time for students, teachers also expressed concern about teachers being asked to do more and more. One elementary teacher said, *"I'm worried that*

teachers are going to have even more responsibilities when schools open-- to keep all surfaces clean (which sounds impossible), enforce distance with students (also impossible), etc. on top of already having too many responsibilities." Many educators believe that students will need additional help from support staff, helpful technology platforms, and enrichment opportunities to ease them into their next grade level or subject area.⁶

"No matter how hard we work, how organized we are, how we try to individualize instruction, this is impossible with large class size. Fewer students means more personalized education, greater understanding of material and deeper learning."

-Middle school teacher

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. In addition to providing one-to-one technology and internet accessibility, districts should utilize CARES Act funds to provide effective training to students, staff, and communities to maximize the use of one-to-one technology and internet accessibility.**

Even after the immediate need of one-to-one technology and internet accessibility is met, barriers to learning continue to persist. Only when students and educators are equipped with the knowledge and skills of using technology effectively will students be prepared for distance learning. Effective training for all stakeholders including students, educators, families, parents, and leaders within the community must be readily available in multiple formats and languages to ensure a digitally literate generation. Distance learning can be effective when students, educators, families, parents, and communities are provided, through CARES Act funding, with digital training to navigate learning management systems and educational applications to maximize the use of one-to-one technology and internet accessibility. As a middle school teacher states, *"There must also be a training(s) for students and families on how to use the software/hardware (that) they will eventually be given for the year as well as expectations on how to use these resources."*

- 2. District and school leaders should put forward clear and concise plans that prioritize mental and physical well-being of students and staff and maximize the impact of CARES Act funds through creative community-based solutions.**

We recognize that the idea of maintaining the health of school communities can seem overwhelming and prohibitively expensive. Nevertheless, the message from educators is clear. Schools must invest significantly in both the physical and mental well-being of their students and staff. The purchasing of supplies to support meal distribution and sanitation is the keystone to maintaining healthy schools and these challenges need to be addressed prior to school restarting in the fall. On top of that, over 90% of educators who selected mental health services as a priority expressed the significant need for school counselors, psychologists, and social workers. The CARES Act funding can support the necessary purchases and staffing in order to focus on the well-being of students and staff.

For educators, students, and families to feel confident to return to school, they need to have a clear understanding of how all these concerns will be addressed. School and district leaders should develop a concise plan, and clearly communicate it with all stakeholders as we move through the pandemic and post-pandemic. Even with the additional CARES Act funding, the increased call for intervention staff can become a challenge for districts to meet the needs of their students and communities as they face the possibility of potential budget shortfalls. This situation creates opportunities for schools and school districts to shift their paradigm about how services and partnering organizations are identified and utilized to support their students and communities. Remote services, partnerships with community-based organizations, and other local and state organizations can serve as potential resources to fill the gaps of our strained educational system. CARES Act funding provides a unique opportunity to facilitate this creativity to meet the mental health needs of students, staff, families, parents, and the local community.

- 3. As district leaders make plans for investing CARES Act funding, they should make sure teachers have a voice in shaping systemic solutions and ensure they receive effective professional development, space, and flexibility to meet students' academic needs.**

Teachers are committed to reaching students where they are, but this commitment will take time and flexibility that may conflict with existing systems. Additionally, the need for support staff, helpful technology platforms, and enrichment opportunities could contribute to the strains in district budgets. CARES Act funding can help districts meet the needs of teachers in order to best support students adapting once again to a changing school system.

In our research, it became clear that while there were consistent challenges faced across the state, there was variation in teachers' recommendations based on their individual context. To ensure that the CARES Act funding is supporting the needs of the educators and students in that community, districts should give teachers an intentional seat at the table when discussing funding allocations as teachers have unique and personal insights that offer significant value. They can also help leaders explore how to think differently about teachers' roles and how they use time.

CONCLUSION

The collective teacher voice offers a direct connection to students and the issues that school systems are facing during COVID. The teachers in our survey expressed concerns around three major areas: technology and internet accessibility, mental and physical health, and academic support and development. These teachers are looking for solutions to move students, staff, and families forward during uncertain times. The innovation and creativity of teachers have never been needed more. Local leaders should be sure to look to teachers in their own community as they determine the most impactful use of federal CARES funds.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary & Secondary Education. Retrieved on June 5, 2020 from: <https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/elementary-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund/>

² Question: "What areas of investment would be most important for your school and students? Please choose the three items you feel would be most important. Responses: (n=201) "Planning and coordinating during long-term closures, including how to provide meals to eligible students, technology for online learning, and IDEA guidance" (68.2%); "Purchasing educational technology, including: hardware; software; connectivity; assistive technology; or, adaptive equipment" (67.2%); "Planning and implementing summer learning and supplemental after school programs" (19.9%); "Mental health services" (44.8%); "Coordinating with public health department" (12.9%); "Training/Professional Development on sanitation and minimizing the spread of infectious diseases" (22.4%); "Purchasing supplies to sanitize and clean facilities" (42.3%). Results may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

³ Question: "Within the area of planning and coordinating during long-term closures, including how to provide meals to eligible students, technology for online learning, and IDEA guidance, what specific recommendations do you have for how funds should be spent?" Open-ended response question. Question: "Within the area of purchasing educational technology, including: hardware; software; connectivity; assistive technology; or, adaptive equipment, what specific recommendations do you have for how funds should be spent?" Open-ended response question.

⁴ Ed-Data - Education Data Partnership (CDE, EdSource, FCMAT) - Retrieved from <https://www.ed-data.org/state/CA> on June 5, 2020.

⁵ Question: "Within the area of mental health services, what specific recommendations do you have for how funds should be spent?" Open-ended response question. Question: "Within the area of coordinating with public health department, what specific recommendations do you have for how funds should be spent?" Open-ended response question. Question: "Within the area of training/professional development on sanitation and minimizing the spread of infectious diseases, what specific recommendations do you have for how funds should be spent?" Open-ended response question. Question: "Within the area of purchasing supplies to sanitize and clean facilities, what specific recommendations do you have for how funds should be spent?" Open-ended response question.

⁶ Question: "Within the area of planning and implementing summer learning and supplemental after school programs, what specific recommendations do you have for how funds should be spent?" Open-ended response question. Question: "What additional resources or investments not included in the CARES Act guidance would you find most helpful for recovering from school building closures and the COVID-19 crisis?" Open-ended response question. Question: "Finally, do you believe the current school closures due to COVID-19 are impacting low-income students, children with disabilities, English learners, students of color, students experiencing homelessness, and foster care youth differently when compared to their peers? If so, how? If you think there are differential impacts, what advice do you have on how to address this?"